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ABSTRACT

This brief examines the relationship between increased child support enforcement and frequency of visitation between children and their nonresident fathers. Data come from the 1997 and 1999 National Survey of America's Families. The study emphasizes children of single mothers because children in such households face the greatest risk of long-term poverty. The study documents the frequency with which nonresident fathers visit their children and notes factors associated with more frequent contact between nonresident fathers and their children. It compares changes in frequency of visitation among families who are likely and unlikely to use child support enforcement services. Results find that children in poverty are particularly likely to live with single mothers and to see their nonresident fathers infrequently or never. Children with support orders who receive payments have more frequent contact with their nonresident fathers. Children born out of wedlock are less likely to visit their fathers than are children born in wedlock. Children born out of wedlock experienced increased visitation following implementation of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act; however, this was true regardless of whether they were likely to use child support enforcement services. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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Children who have support orders and receive payments have more frequent contact with their nonresident fathers.

Do Nonresident Fathers Who Pay Child Support Visit Their Children More?

Heather Koball and Desiree Principe

Introduction

In 1996 the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) strengthened child support enforcement laws and increased penalties for nonpayment of child support. PRWORA required states to improve automation of child support collection systems, gave states the authority to suspend driver's, occupational, and recreational licenses for nonpayment of support, and required states to expand their voluntary paternity establishment programs.

Nonresident fathers, particularly low-income fathers, are increasingly likely to be pursued in the expanding child support enforcement effort. This enforcement has increased the collection of child support, especially for children born out of wedlock (Freeman and Waldfogel 1998). At the same time, child support enforcement has had the unanticipated consequence of affecting several family behaviors. Increased child support enforcement has been linked to lower rates of nonmarital childbearing (Case 1998), remarriage (Bloom, Conrad, and Miller 1998), and divorce (Nixon 1996).

In this brief we examine the relationship between increased child support enforcement and frequency of visitation between children and their nonresident fathers. Children who live apart from their fathers are at a greater risk of living in poverty, having low academic achievement, and exhibiting behavioral problems. Frequent contact between children and their nonresident fathers can protect children from some of the negative consequences of parental separation. Several recent studies have shown that more frequent contact with nonresident fathers is linked to children's greater emotional well-being and academic success (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Perloff and Buckner 1996; Coley 1998). Children often desire more contact with their nonresident fathers. In fact, children of divorce reported that the most negative outcome of their parents' divorce was reduced contact with their fathers (Kelly 1993).

As child support enforcement forges a monetary connection between many nonresident fathers and their children, fathers may have more desire to maintain or develop an emotional connection to their children. Some critics, however, suggest that increased enforcement could harm the fragile relationship between children and their nonresident fathers. Interviews with low-income men reveal that mothers' cooperation with child support agencies can increase conflict between separated parents (Furstenberg, Sherwood, and Sullivan 1992; Roy 1999). Visitation between nonresident fathers and their children often depends on the quality of the parental relationship (Nord and Zill 1996); therefore, increased enforcement could deter father visitation. It is also possible that increased enforcement will have no effect on fathers' desire or ability to see their children.

We use data from the 1997 and 1999 National Survey of America's Families to examine whether the frequency of visita-

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tion between nonresident fathers and their children has changed as child support enforcement has increased. We focus on children of single (not currently married) mothers because most children with absent fathers live with single mothers, and children in households headed by single mothers face the greatest risk of experiencing long-term poverty.

We begin by documenting the frequency with which nonresident fathers visit their children, as well as some of the main factors associated with more frequent contact between nonresident fathers and their children. We then compare changes in frequency of visitation among families who are likely to use child support enforcement services and families who are unlikely to use these services.

We find that children in poverty are particularly likely to live with single mothers and to see their nonresident fathers infrequently or never. Children who have support orders and receive payments have more frequent contact with their nonresident fathers. We find that children born out of wedlock are less likely to visit their fathers than are children born in wedlock. Children born out of wedlock experienced an increase in visitation following the implementation of PRWORA; however, this was true regardless of whether they were likely to use child support enforcement services. We find no increase in nonresident father visitation among children born in wedlock, regardless of whether they were likely to use child support enforcement services.

Thirty-four percent of children born out of wedlock did not see their fathers at all in the previous year, compared with 16 percent of children born to married parents.

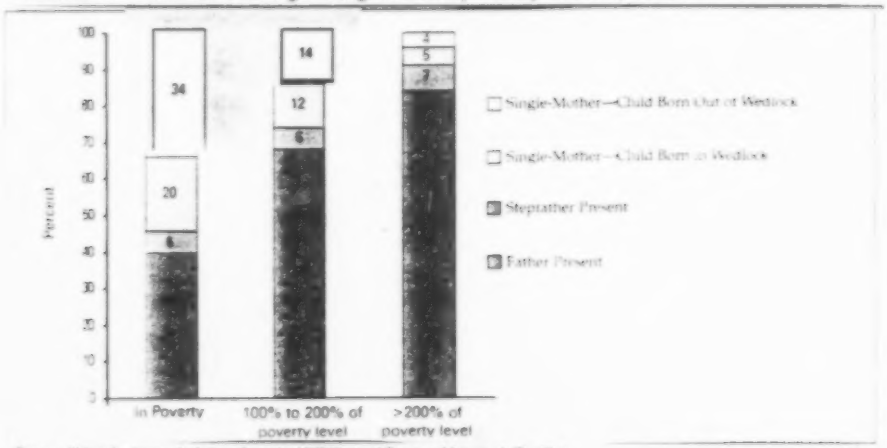
Frequency of Father Visitation

Children's poverty status is strongly related to whether they live with their fathers. In 1999, 28 percent of children did not live with their fathers. Only 40 percent of children in poverty lived with their fathers (figure 1). In contrast, 84 percent of children in families with incomes at least twice the federal poverty level lived with their fathers.

Children who lived in poverty were much more likely to have been born out of wedlock than were children who were not living in poverty. Thirty-four percent of poor children were born out of wedlock and lived with single mothers, compared with just 4 percent of children whose family income was twice the poverty threshold. Part of the reason for the strong link between poverty and father absence is that in the wake of a father's absence, mothers and children often lose the financial resources fathers provide.

Among children who lived with single mothers, those who were born out of wedlock were much less likely to have seen their fathers in the previous year than were those who were born to married parents (table 1). Thirty-four percent of children

FIGURE 1. Children's Living Arrangements by Family Income, 1999



Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1999 National Survey of America's Families.

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born out of wedlock did not see their fathers at all in the previous year, compared with 16 percent of children born to married parents. Parental marital status had less impact on the proportion of children who saw their nonresident fathers frequently, though the difference was statistically significant. Thirty-three percent of children born out of wedlock saw their fathers at least once a week, and 38 percent of children born in wedlock did.

Among children born out of wedlock, younger children were more likely to see their fathers than were older children (table 2). About three-quarters of young children born to unmarried parents had visited their fathers in the previous year, compared with just 58 percent of teens born to unmarried parents. The current age of children born in wedlock was not significantly related to whether they saw their nonresident fathers in the previous year. The less frequent visitation between out-of-wedlock teenagers and their nonresident fathers may be related to the length of time since the dissolution of the parents' union. Many parents of out-of-wedlock children end their romantic relationships either

TABLE 1. Proportion of Children Living with Single Mothers Who Visited Their Nonresident Fathers in the Previous Year, by Whether Child Was Born in Wedlock, 1999

How Often Children Visited Nonresident Fathers	Born Out of Wedlock	Born in Wedlock
Not at all	34	16**
At least once a week[a]	33	38*

Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1999 National Survey of America's Families.
a. Includes children who spend the summer with their fathers.
* Significantly different from children born out of wedlock at $p < .05$.
** Significantly different from children born out of wedlock at $p < .01$.

TABLE 2. Proportion of Children Living with Single Mothers Who Visited Their Nonresident Fathers in the Previous Year, by Demographic Characteristics, 1999

	Visited Father in Previous Year	
	Out of Wedlock	In Wedlock
Child's Age		
0 to 5[a]	72	85
6 to 11	65**	83
12 to 18	58**	80
Child's Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic[a]	55	66
African-American	73**	83**
White	63**	86**
Mother's Education		
Less than high school[a]	63	70
High school or GED	67	83*
More than high school	69	86**
Family Income: Percent of Poverty Level		
Less than 100 percent[a]	63	80
100 to 200 percent	70*	78
More than 200 percent	72**	88**

Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1999 National Survey of America's Families.
a. Reference category
* Significantly different from reference category, $p < .05$
** Significantly different from reference category, $p < .01$

Children born out of wedlock, regardless of income, were more likely to visit their fathers after PRWORA was enacted.

before their children's births or when their children are young (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2001). The frequency of nonresident fathers' visits tends to decrease the longer fathers live apart from their children (Manning and Smock 1999).

Hispanic children living with their single mothers, regardless of their parents' marital status at the time of birth, were much less likely to see their fathers in the previous year than were either African-American or white children. Just over half of Hispanic children born out of wedlock had visited their fathers in the previous year, compared with 73 percent of African-American children and 63 percent of white children. About two-thirds of Hispanic children born to married parents visited their fathers in the previous year, compared with 83 percent of African-American children and 86 percent of white children. Among children born to unmarried parents, African-American children were significantly more likely to see their fathers than white children. Among children born in wedlock there was no significant difference in father visitation between African-American and white children.

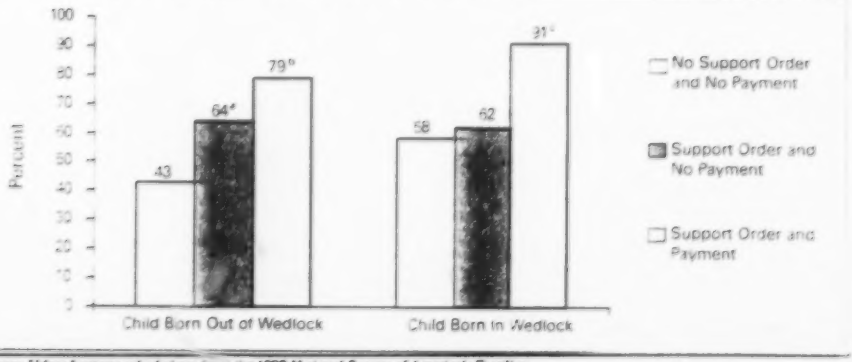
Among children born in wedlock, those with more highly educated mothers saw their fathers more frequently. Seventy percent of children born in wedlock whose mothers had less than a high school education saw their fathers in the previous year, compared with 86 percent of children born in wedlock whose mothers had at least some college education. Mothers' education was not associated with the frequency of visitation for children born out of wedlock.

Children who were living in poverty were less likely to have seen their fathers in the previous year than were children whose families earned at least twice the federal poverty level. Among children whose family income was below poverty level, 63 percent of children born to unmarried parents and 80 percent of children born to married parents visited their father in the previous year, compared with 72 percent and 88 percent, respectively, for children with higher family incomes. Children who live in poverty were more likely to have an absent father, and less likely to see that absent father, compounding many of the negative outcomes associated with parental separation.

Child Support Payments and Frequency of Father Visitation

Fathers who pay child support are more likely to visit their children. For children born out of wedlock who did not receive child support, just having a support order was linked with a higher probability of seeing their nonresident fathers (figure 2). Forty-three percent of children born out of wedlock, whose fathers did not have a support order and paid no child support, saw their fathers in the previous year, compared with 64 percent of children whose

FIGURE 2. Proportion of Children Visiting Their Nonresident Fathers in the Previous Year, by Child Support Order and Payment, 1999



Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1999 National Survey of America's Families.
a. Significantly different from children born out of wedlock with no support order or payment, $p < .01$.
b. Significantly different from children born out of wedlock with support order and no payment, $p < .01$.
c. Significantly different from children born in wedlock with support order and no payment, $p < .01$.

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TABLE 3. *Proportion of Children Born Out of Wedlock Who Visited Their Nonresident Fathers, by Family Income and Mother's Education, 1997 and 1999*

	Visited Father in Previous Year		Visited Father at Least Once a Week[a]	
	1997	1999	1997	1999
Family income below FPL	54	63**	26	30
Family income above FPL	64	71**	32	36
Family income below median	55	62**	24	28
Family income above median	65	72**	34	40
Mother's education: high school or less	58	65**	30	32
Mother's education: more than high school	61	69**	24	35**

Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1997 and 1999 National Survey of America's Families.
a. Includes children who spend the summer with their fathers.
** Percent is significantly higher in 1999, $p < .01$.
FPL = federal poverty level

fathers did not pay child support, but did have a support order. If children received child support payments on a support order, they were even more likely to see their fathers. Seventy-nine percent of children born out of wedlock whose fathers had a support order and paid child support saw their fathers in the previous year.

Having a support order was not related to more frequent father visitation for children who were born to married couples. If nonresident fathers paid on support orders, however, they were much more likely to see their children. Ninety-one percent of children born to married parents visited their fathers in the previous year, if their fathers paid on their support orders, compared with 62 percent of children whose fathers did not pay on their support orders.

Change in Father Visitation

In this section we examine whether the frequency of nonresident father visitation has changed since child support enforcement was increased under PRWORA. Under PRWORA, families that receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are required to cooperate with child support enforcement as a condition for receiving TANF. PRWORA also increased the strength of child support enforcement services. Though child support enforcement is available to all custodial families, most families that use the services are low-income (Lyon 1999).

We compare changes in the frequency of father-child contact between low-income and high-income families to determine whether there was greater change in father visitation for low-income children. Low-income children were more likely to be affected by the more stringent child support enforcement enacted with PRWORA because their custodial parents are more likely to use government services to collect child support. Low-income families were identified as such by three different measures to ensure reliability of results. The first measure defined a low-income family as one with a family income below the poverty level. For the second measure a low-income family was defined as one with a family income below the median income for families headed by single mothers. For the third measure a low-income family was identified as one with the custodial mother having no more than a high school education, because mother's education is highly correlated with income.

Children born to unmarried parents were more likely to have visited their fathers in 1999 than they were in 1997, but this increase in visitation was the same for low- and high-income families, regardless of the income measure used (table 3). There was a 7 to 9 percentage point increase in the proportion of children who

There was little change in the frequency of father-child contact for children born to married parents.

TABLE 4. Change in Nonresident Father Visitation by Family Income and Mother's Education: Children Born In Wedlock, 1997 and 1999

	Visited Father in Previous Year		Visited Father at Least Once a Week[a]	
	1997	1999	1997	1999
Family income below FPL	80	80	40	38
Family income above FPL	83	84	40	38
Family income below median	81	79	40	37
Family income above median	82	85	40	39
Mother's education: high school or less	81	78	39	36
Mother's education: more than high school	82	86	41	39

Source: Urban Institute calculations from the 1997 and 1999 National Survey of America's Families.
a. Includes children who spend the summer with their fathers.
FPL = federal poverty level

had seen their nonresident fathers in the previous year. The proportion of children who saw their fathers at least once a week did not increase, except for children with highly educated mothers. The results suggest that children born out of wedlock enjoyed more contact with their fathers in 1998 than they had in 1996, but those children whose fathers were more likely to be involved in the government's increased effort to collect child support did not experience a larger increase in father visitation.

There was little change in the frequency of father-child contact for children born to married parents, regardless of the income measure used (table 4). The proportion of children born in wedlock who saw their fathers in the previous year started at a relatively high level before PRWORA, and did not increase in the subsequent two-year period.

The PRWORA provision to expand state programs for voluntary paternity establishment was aimed at families of all incomes with out-of-wedlock children. Voluntary paternity programs are generally located in hospitals in order to establish paternity for children born out of wedlock at the time of their birth, regardless of their families' income. The expanded paternity establishment programs may have contributed to the increase in visitation that was observed among out-of-wedlock children but not among children born in wedlock.

Conclusion

Poor children are much less likely to live with their fathers than are higher income children. In addition, poor children are less likely to visit their nonresident fathers. This is particularly true for children who are born out of wedlock, leaving them more vulnerable to negative outcomes that are associated with being raised in a nonintact family.

The findings show that fathers with support orders and those who pay on these orders are more likely to visit their children. It is possible that child support enforcement draws more nonresident fathers into visiting relationships with their children. Alternatively, fathers who are highly involved with their children may simply have greater desire to pay their child support, and child support enforcement may not affect fathers' motivation to visit children.

Children born out of wedlock, regardless of income, were more likely to visit their fathers after PRWORA was enacted. It is possible that increased voluntary paternity establishment programs encouraged more nonresident fathers to visit their out-of-wedlock children because these programs are aimed at families of all income

levels that have a nonmarital birth. It is also possible that other factors, such as changing social norms about fatherhood, were responsible for encouraging more fathers of nonmarital children to stay involved in their lives.

Children born in wedlock were not more likely to see their fathers in 1999 than in 1997, regardless of income level. Fathers who paid child support were more likely to visit their children, but the level of visitation did not rise following increased child support enforcement. However, the frequency of visitation between children born in wedlock and their nonresident fathers began at a relatively high level.

These data reflect changes just two years after passage of PRWORA. As new child support enforcement procedures become firmly established, it is possible that the rate of child support orders and payments will increase over time. It will be important to track the involvement of nonresident fathers with their children and to identify factors that facilitate involvement. As noted earlier, father involvement can help preserve children's financial and emotional well-being following parental separation.

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This series presents findings from the 1997 and 1999 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered in each round from more than 42,000 households with and without telephones that are representative of the nation as a whole and of 13 selected states (Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin). As in all surveys, the data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error. Additional information on the NSAF can be obtained at **http://newfederalism.urban.org**.

The NSAF is part of ***Assessing the New Federalism***, a multiyear project to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal to the state and local levels. Alan Weil is the project director. The project analyzes changes in income support, social services, and health programs. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies child and family well-being.

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